

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Regional Editors and Broadcasters on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues

September 21, 1983

The President. Good afternoon, and welcome to the White House. I've enjoyed this opportunity to break bread with you once again.

The professional relationship between those of us in public office and members of the press is an important ingredient of American freedom. Senator Moynihan once pointed out that countries which have papers filled with good news usually have jails filled with good people. Earlier this year, I suggested that perhaps—and it was a gentle suggestion—that perhaps the press could focus a bit more on the many wonderful things that Americans are doing for each other, especially during National Volunteer Week. There were a few cries of outrage, but now that the dust has settled, I think there's been a movement in the last few months to show the uplifting side of American life as well as our flaws. Of course, the imperfections need to be brought out; otherwise, they might never be corrected.

One of our greatest national treasures is our right as Americans to criticize government without fear of reprisal. There's a story about a Soviet citizen who was telling an American traveler that people in Russia are free to speak just like they are in the United States. The difference is that in the United States, they're free after they speak.

Journalism is not an easy profession, especially when the events of the day are immersed in theories and schools of thought not familiar to an individual that's trying to meet a deadline. In the first 2 years of this administration, economic issues became the focus of news coverage as never before. We were making fundamental changes in the direction of this country, and it wasn't always easy to understand what was happening and why the changes were being made. Well, these changes take time before they can take hold. As you understand, the suggestion that economic freedom needs time to work isn't good copy after a few weeks, and it's a bit difficult to visualize for

a news audience how bad things would be if certain changes hadn't taken place.

For example, thanks to our program against inflation, a middle-income family today has \$600 more in purchasing power than in 1980. Now, I think that's an important story, yet it's a hard one to present visually on a newscast. Since the beginning of the year, the expansion of the economy has been robust. America is beginning to move again after years of isolation and—or I should say inflation and stagnation. I think that was a Freudian slip when I said isolation there.

But yesterday, the stock market, as you know, hit a new alltime high. And I'm pleased to report that this morning we received more heartening news about the economy. The figures for second quarter economic growth in gross national product had been revised upward for the second time from 9.2 percent to 9.7 percent, and now it is estimated that economic activity in the third quarter is rising at an annual rate of 7 percent.

Some of the foreign policy challenges we face are just as vexing as those concerning our economy, and they're just as difficult for journalists to cover. When we got to Washington we were faced with an unrelenting buildup of armaments and military equipment in Central America. Much of this material is provided by the Soviets and their Cuban and Libyan allies. The American people and even some journalists are confused about what's happening in Central America. Well, stated succinctly, we're trying, even amid the turmoil, to encourage democracy, to ensure economic development, and to engage in dialog and listen to every idea that might put an end to the bloodshed and bring peace. What we cannot do is permit Soviet-armed and Cuban-trained insurgents to shoot their way into power, simply because we're unwilling to provide those who believe in democratic government with the means to defend themselves.

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was a defense of the Lebanese Army and that there is great concern that the Gemayel government will fall.

The President. Well, the idea was that the multinational force was there to try and preserve order while the army then proceeded to take over and take over from those militia factions in their own country. So I think that the mission that we're on is still operative.

Cuba

Q. Mr. President—[inaudible]—today that you commented to a Cuban American colleague of mine in Miami regarding a secret—[inaudible]—agreement and how you felt that the shipment of Soviet—[inaudible]—offensive arms might mean that the U.S. is not bound by its promise not to invade Cuba. It stirred a lot of commotion in south Florida's Cuban American community. They want to know more—if, in fact, this secret agreement is under review; if so, what are the implications, and are we going to get tougher with Castro now that the Soviets are—[inaudible]—around the world?

The President. Well, the statement that I made was based—that agreement is not, you know, in the form of some formal treaty or agreement. This was a series of letters exchanged between President Kennedy and the Castro regime.

To our knowledge, they have not brought back in nuclear weapons, which was part of it. We have felt, in a number of instances, the so-called agreement in this letter form is rather ambiguous on many points. I think what I was trying to say was that we believe that in spirit, certainly, that has been abrogated, and yet, it's very hard to pin it down as you would with a treaty and say, "You've broken the treaty."

We tried to establish communications with Mr. Castro quite some time ago when he had indicated that perhaps this should be done, and we got no place. And as far as we're concerned, we are going to continue there, and the Soviet efforts to establish another Cuba on our mainland in Central America, and we're going to do that as we have been doing it in Central America.

Central America

Q. Mr. President, also, now that the Soviet regime is—[inaudible]—around the world, is it time for—[inaudible]—have on our doorstep, you know, violations of international rules with Cuba. Can we get tougher? And regarding Central America, are we getting into a war to avoid a Communist takeover in Central America?

The President. Now, you've asked a question that I really shouldn't answer. I don't see the necessity for the United States going to war in any place where we are. But as I once said in a press conference here—and some of the regular White House press corps tried to hang me out to dry on it—there are some things about which a President should never say never, and I just think things of this kind.

But there is nothing in our plans that envisions a war for the United States. Our job is trying to prevent war wherever it may come in the world. And this is the reason for our military buildup, and it's the reason for our meeting in disarmament talks—more than any other administration has ever had going at one time in our history.

So, I can just say that we're going to continue on this line, and that any time that Castro—whose country is in dire straits, is an economic basket case—any time that he wants to make the moves to return to the community of American nations here in the Western Hemisphere, we'd be happy to sit down with him and work that out. But it begins with him coming out from under the wing of the Soviet Union.

Q. Mr. President?

The President. Now, wait a minute. I've got to go to the back of the room.